

Book Reviews

Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering

SHERMAN A. JACKSON, 2009

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Sherman A. Jackson's academic output over the last few decades has been of an interdisciplinary and multifaceted nature, from the intricate elaborations of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *furū' al-fiqh* via meticulous studies of the legal thought of the Mamluk jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285) to the elucidation of advanced theological discussions on the nature of orthodoxy and heresy in Islam through the systematic analysis and translation of *Faysal al-Tafrīq* by the theologian *par excellence* Abu Hamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and, most recently, the explication of the sober path of Sufism for non-Sufis, in the form of the exploration and subsequent translation of *Tāj al-'Arūs* authored by the Shadhili-Sufi Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Sakandārī (d. 703/1309). Jackson's scholastic thoughts are not restricted entirely to antiquity, as he has written copious oeuvres on the post-9/11 American Muslim socio-political milieu and has engaged in significantly relevant discussions on the conception, nature and (re)interpretation of *ḥijāb*, in the pre-modern, modern and, potentially, the post-modern intellectual sense.

Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering indicates a further aspect of Jackson's scholastic acumen and academic research, which deals with Islam and modernity rather than the medieval Islamic intellectual milieu. This monograph is a sequel to Jackson's *Islam and the Blackamerican*, where his expertise in the realm of "black religion" and African-American Muslim diaspora is demonstrated via his nuanced deliberations. However, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* is more than just a simple sequel: it attempts to provide a traditional Islamic theological response to one of the enduring problems within "Black theology", as argued by William R. Jones in his seminal and vastly controversial book *Is God a White Racist?* Jones's argument is constructed around the highly problematic theological area of theodicy, which attempted to reconcile evil and suffering with the theistic conception of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. Jones's dispute is more distinctive and black experience centric. Usually referred to as "Black theodicy", it poses the incisive question: Does God care about the pain and suffering of the Black African-American community? This question implicitly insinuates a hidden form of "divine racism", as Jackson asserts: "simply put, if God is omnipotent, God must have the power to eradicate black suffering" (p. 14). Thus, Jones's argument contests the traditional concept and nature of a theistic God by demanding a re-interpretation or a theologically cogent resolution. Furthermore, Jones's argument features a pragmatic component, which endeavours to discern the most appropriate reaction of the African-American community, in terms of their pain and suffering, by way of either a quietist or an activist socio-political attitude.

Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering consists of an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion and copious endnotes. In the introduction, Jackson establishes the rationale of his exploration, stating: "...Islam, by embracing divine omnipotence and divine

omnibenevolence, might be *assumed* to be equally susceptible to the charge of divine racism" (p. 6). The remainder of the introduction meticulously expounds Jones's theodical argument and his notion of "humanocentric theism", which is associated with the analysis and evaluation of subsequent further contributions and attempted resolutions, which were proffered by several intellectuals and Christian theologians. Chapter 1 proclaims to "trace the development of Muslim theology, from its embryonic beginnings to its status as a full-blown, metacognitive tradition" (p. 23); however, this theological preamble is not a conventional overview of the development of the formative Islamic theological milieu (*'ilm al-kalām*) akin to the expositions of other academic researchers, such as H.A Wolfson, W.M. Watt or M. Fakhry. Rather, it is an innovative and interdisciplinary discussion that endeavours to draw attention to the congruence between antiquity and modernity. For example, Jackson demonstrates how ostensibly anthropomorphic Qur'ānic verses can be acknowledged and explained, through literal interpretation, via the insights from Charles Hartshorne's Process theology *contra* the Aristotelian philosophical tradition which influenced the majority of Muslim theologians, particularly the rationalists. In another interesting discussion and incorporating the theories of the Ghanaian scholar, Kwame Gyekye, Jackson elaborates on the nature of tradition (*al-naql*) and its crucial relationship with modernity which he uses to emphasise the resemblance with the tendencies of Muslim traditionalists (pp. 38–43). The chapter lucidly expounds on the Muslim rationalists and traditionalists, which epitomise the two main theological movements within formative Islam. Jackson succinctly indicates the essence of the dichotomous nature of the theological tendencies, stating

the fault line separating these two theological approaches did not lie in each giving a different priority to reason (*al-'aql*) verse revelation ... it is more accurate to say that these two approaches represented not two different *attitudes towards* reason, but two different *traditions of* reason. The conflict, in other words, was not over how much authority to accord reason or revelation per se, but over which regime of sense should govern the act of reading revelation. (p. 32)

The analysis of the rationalist and traditionalist tendencies is coupled with an overarching discussion of the concept of "Sunnism" and Orthodoxy, via an elaboration of the four classical Muslim theological schools viz. the rationalist movements of Mu'tazilism, Ash'arism and Māturīdism and Traditionalism, as represented initially by Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and, in the medieval epoch, vociferously and polemically by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328). Thus, Chapters 2–5 deal with each of the above mentioned theological schools in exhaustive detail. Each chapter adheres to a formulaic style consisting of three sections dealing with the early development and basic contours of the school, relevant theological detail and, finally, the theological school's precise theodical response to Jones's argument of "divine racism". Jackson expounds how each school's *sine qua non* theological principles can be consistently applied to this unequivocally modern problem. The first two sections of each chapter may be read as independent theological oeuvres: these chapters, as an ensemble, are a masterpiece of nuanced theological exposition, analysis and application, with regards to *inter alia* epistemology, scriptural hermeneutics, theodicy, free-will and predestination. In the conclusion, Jackson, in addition to providing an overview of the theological resolutions that have been proffered, also compares and contrasts each theological response, in order to divulge further nuances with subsequent theoretical and pragmatic clarifications and applications to issues raised by Jones. Jackson's conclusions include the subsequent noteworthy aspects:

In sum, despite their emphatic and explicit endorsement of divine omnipotence, none of the schools of classical Muslim theology embrace, as their going opinion, the denial of human choice...none of the classical schools of Muslim theology would stand for Jones's charge that God is a white racist. And none of them embrace constructions of omnipotence that would bind God-fearing Blackamericans to a piety of quietism...with the exception of the Mu'tazilites, Sunni Tradition's understanding of the relationship between omnipotence and omnibenevolence defies Jones's contention that the only reason that God would not change an evil, such as black suffering, is that God is either *pleased* with it or is *incapable* of changing it. (pp. 158–159)

Jackson's *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* elucidates a number of significant aspects relating to the nature and modern relevance of the classical Muslim theological tradition and, by some extension, the Shi'a tradition, to essentially contemporaneous problems and predicaments; for example, those raised by Jones in particular and others of a more general nature, such as Islam's intellectual response to secularism, atheism, scientism and other conflicting theological, philosophical and politico-ideological perspectives. However, the relevance and use of 'ilm al-kalām has been considered by many as on the realms of neglect and intellectual decline since the epoch of the "philosophical theology" of the Ash'arī theological authorities of al-Ghazālī and Fakr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 607/1210). Consequently, later Ash'arī exponents, such as al-Ījī (d. 756/1355), al-Taftazānī (d. 793/1390), al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), al-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490) et al. contributed nothing of substantial innovation and insight, which could be salvaged for modernity, according to several traditional and academic writers such as M. Fakhry. Subsequently, under the banner of reformation (*iṣlāh*) and renewal (*tajdīd*), scholars and thinkers such as Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1322/1905) and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1356/1938) demanded a re-interpretation of the tools and principles of 'ilm al-kalām, in order to make them more applicable and relevant for modern problems encountered by the Islamic civilisation during the centuries of intellectual and socio-political decline. There seems to be some validity and cogence in this demand, which was ubiquitous within Ottoman, Arab and South-Asian intellectual circles during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, Jackson has demonstrated, via his applied theology *modus operandi*, how aspects of classical Sunni theological traditions can be and are still vastly relevant within the realms of modernity. The holistic calls for a re-interpretation of 'ilm al-kalām must thus be seen as tentative and must be viewed with some reservation: the problem may be associated with the theologian as much as the theological tools utilised. *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* demonstrates that an accomplished theologian can deduce modern responses via the existing classical Muslim theological tradition *contra* the perceived image of intellectual malaise within 'ilm al-kalām.

An Islamic perspective on "Black theodicy" has long been absent, as acknowledged by Jackson himself. However, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* elucidates how the modern Muslim community, such as the African-American Muslim community, can cogently anchor their future and overcome past socio-historical problems via the Islamic *weltanschauung*. Jackson clearly demonstrates that Islam is applicable and possesses the relevant tools for the resolutions of the problems and predicaments associated with modernity. The monograph fails to deal with a few aspects and it would have been useful if Jackson could have elaborated on responses that may have been proffered by other Muslim orthodoxical or heterodoxical African-American figures and diaspora, in order to further contextualise the discussion. Furthermore, it would have been interesting

if Jackson had further explored the notions of “racism”, and “blackness” from within the Islamic scholastic tradition, with specific reference to the theologians (*mutakallūm*) and the jurists (*fuqahāʾ*) through the epochs in order to shed some light on the assertions that Islam, analogous to Christianity, endorsed black enslavement and that a form of implicit racism had actually prevailed. Nevertheless, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* is an outstanding *opus*, for which Jackson’s efforts should be applauded.

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